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An Agrarian History of South Asia

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CHAPTER 1

AGRICULTURE

Most of human history in South Asia is a feature of life on the land, but most documents that we use to write agrarian history concern the state. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* set the tone by putting farming and herding under the heading of state revenue. Hundreds of thousands of stone and copper inscriptions appear in the first millennium of the Common Era (CE). Scattered across the land from Nepal to Sri Lanka, they documented agrarian conditions, but their purpose was rather to constitute medieval dynasties. After 1300, official documents narrate more and more powerful states. In the sixteenth century, Mughal sultans built South Asia's first empire of agrarian taxation, and their revenue assessments, collections, and entitlements produced more data on agrarian conditions than any previous regime. In 1595, Abu-l Fazl's *Ain-i Akbari* depicted agriculture in accounts of imperial finance. After 1760, English officials did the same. After 1870, nationalists rendered the country as part of the nation, and since 1947 agriculture has been a measure of national development. For two millennia, elites have recorded agrarian facts to bolster regimes and to mobilise the opposition, so we inherit a huge archive documenting agrarian aspects of historical states.

Over the centuries, however, agrarian history has also moved along in farming environments, outside the institutional structure of states, almost always connected in one way or another to state authority, but embedded basically in the everyday life of agricultural communities. Dynasties expand into agrarian space. Empires incorporate farm and forest, using various degrees and types of power, gaining here, losing there, adapting to local circumstances and modifying state institutions to embrace new regions of cultivation. Modern nations appropriate agrarian identity and territory. But politics condition agriculture without determining the logic of farming or the character of agrarian life; and country folk always seem to elude state control, even as some locals are sinews of state power in the village. Rulers and farmers – state power and agrarian social forces – interact historically and shape one another and, in this context, states tell only part of the story of the

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agrarian past. Scholars need documentation produced outside the state and a critical perspective on official records to situate the historical imagination at the slippery articulation of state institutions and agrarian communities.

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Maintaining this kind of perspective – seeing agrarian history askew of state power and reading official sources against the grain – becomes more difficult for the period after 1870, when documentation also becomes most plentiful. A respected modern scholarly canon and a vast modern official archive have colluded to make it difficult for scholars to imagine that agrarian *history* – as distinct from timeless, age-old, village tradition and peasant culture – has any real autonomy from the power of the state. Villagers, farmers, agricultural workers, forest cultivators, and pastoral peoples often appear in the dramas of history, but they most often appear to be moving on history's stage in reaction to state activity or in response to elite initiative, obeying or resisting controls imposed upon them by state institutions and by powerful, autonomous elites. The rustic world – both in itself and for itself – appears in such accounts to be an ancient repetition. Agrarian folk appear as a negative mirror image of all that is urban, industrial, and modern; not as makers of history, but rather as inhabitants of history, endowed with mentalities and memories which can be recovered, but not with creative powers to transform their world. Such an appearance took hold in the nineteenth century, as a very long trend of increasing state power in South Asia accelerated dramatically under British rule. A turning point occurred around 1870, by which time the institutions of imperial bureaucracy, ideologies of development, and analytical sciences of management had been combined with industrial technology to form the material and cultural context for agrarian life that we call modernity. Until then, official documents still recorded aspects of agrarian societies that eluded state control and official understanding, but, from this point onward, texts render the countryside through the lens of the modern state's minute and comprehensive managerial empiricism. Agrarian sites now appear as standardised objects of administration, policy debate, and political struggle. Idiosyncratic local histories and old agrarian territories were in effect buried by imperial modernity under mountains of homogeneous,

official data, as villages, towns, districts, and provinces became standard units for conventional studies of politics, economics, culture, and society. The non-modern quality of the agrarian past became quaint stuff for gazetteers and folklore, irrelevant for history except as a reflection of archaic peasant memory and tradition – marginalia – cut off from the modern historical mainstream.

Modernity's understanding of the 'agrarian' focused first and foremost on matters of state policy, agricultural production, law and order, and resistance and rebellion. Agrarian history appeared first as a chronicle of state policy, whose impact was measured in the endless dance of numbers on agrarian taxation, rent, debt, cropping, output, living standards, technology, demography, land holding, contracts, marketing, and other money matters. For the city folk who worked in government and in the urban public sphere – the brains of modernity – rustic localities became alien, peripheral, and abstract. All the places, experiences, and circumstances 'out there' in the country became significant primarily as indicators of conditions and trends in modern state territory. To comprehend the country, modernity invented statistics and theories to capture the basic principles of agricultural production and rural society in parsimonious assumptions, models, and ideal types. Compact and comprehensive data informed theories of caste society, village tradition, capitalist transformations, agricultural improvement, and the market economy; these were formalised and packed into portable textbooks and handbooks. Farm statistics rolled off government presses. Official manuals codified agrarian administration. All things agrarian entered the book of the modern state. Agrarian facts entered modern minds through policy debates, statistical studies, guide books, travel maps, law reports, ethnography, news, and theories of modernity and tradition.

In this context, the urban middle classes invented an agrarian discourse that was preoccupied with matters of public policy. By 1870, agrarian conditions appeared most influentially in statistics that measured economic progress and government efforts to develop agriculture. By then, policy debates about rural India excited Indian middle-class intellectuals for whom modernity involved a cultural opposition between their own urbanity and the rural, rustic, tradition of the village. Already in the 1850s, when Karl Marx sat in London using East India Company dispatches to write about India for readers of the *New York Tribune*, a modern world information network was

beginning to span urban sites of English literacy running from East Asia to Europe and the Americas; and all the English-speaking middle classes had soon formed a broadly similar sensibility toward agrarian issues, which emphasised the state's responsibility to facilitate the expansion of private production and wealth. Thus a book like Robert Mulhall's *The Progress of the World in Arts, Agriculture, Commerce, Manufacture, Instruction, Railways, and Public Wealth*, published in London (in 1880) came rapidly to Philadelphia and New York; and it described economic progress in terms that typified public discourse in British India. Though many urban intellectuals in South Asia knew the countryside personally – as landowners, merchants, bankers, and lawyers, and by their own family experience – their public discussions and formulations of agrarian knowledge did not highlight their own direct, intimate knowledge. Their sense of agrarian territory rested firmly on official knowledge. By 1880, competing interest groups were vocal in national policy debates concerning agriculture in Europe, America, and territories of the British empire spilling over into Africa, Australia, and the Caribbean,¹ and agrarian issues made a good public showing in British India during policy debates about taxation, land law, money lending, tenancy reform, tariffs and trade, irrigation expenditure, commodity crops (sugar, tobacco, indigo, cotton, tea, and opium), bonded labour, indenture, famines, land alienation, cooperative credit, survey and settlement, agricultural sciences, and forestry. More than any direct experience of village life, these debates informed the evolution of national ideas about the historical substance of agrarian South Asia.

The modern intelligentsia found their countryside in the interwoven discourses of empire and nationality. In the major urban centres of British India, national leaders among the Indian middle classes shared with Europeans an urban identity, alienated from the countryside. But at the same time, imperial ideology lumped all the natives together as native subjects, so India's political nationality evolved as intellectuals brought town and country together in the abstract opposition of 'Indian' and 'British'. This enabled Indian nationalists to produce a distinctively *national* sense of agrarian territory inside the British empire. Nationalism protected the cultural status of the urban middle

¹ Niek Koning, *The Failure of Agrarian Capitalism: Agrarian Politics in the UK, Germany, the Netherlands and the USA, 1846–1919*, London, 1994, pp. 167–9.

classes as it united peoples of India against the oppressions of colonialism. By promulgating modern ideas about religious community, racial identity, linguistic identity, national development, and political progress, middle-class leaders made the foreign character of British rule the central issue in agrarian history. They subsumed the history of all the national land and all the people of the nation into a unitary history of the Indian nation. Modern nationality made the Indian middle classes both equal to and superior to, both like and not like, their country cousins; equally native but more knowledgeable, articulate, international, and modern – ready for leadership. Educated leaders of the nation could speak for the country, on behalf of country folk. As a literate voice for illiterate people, a national intelligentsia could present agricultural problems to the public and represent the inarticulate ‘rural masses’. National voices expressed a distinctively middle-class middleness by translating (vernacular) village tradition into the (English) language of modernity. They made the problems of the country into a critique of colonial policy so as to make agrarian South Asia a colonial problem, calling out for national attention. By the 1850s, texts written along these lines appear in Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras; and from the 1870s, a national agrarian imagination formed among authors such as Dadabhai Naoroji, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Romesh Chandra Dutt, and M. G. Ranade. After 1870, novels, short stories, plays, poetry, and academic studies depicted the national countryside more and more frequently in a set of iconic images. By the 1920s, national agrarian studies were institutionalised in universities. National culture had subsumed agrarian territories.

Between 1870 and 1930, agrarian South Asia assumed its modern intellectual appearance and acquired its own history. Old orientalist and official knowledge – from the days of Company Raj – were still basic. But the conjuncture of famines (and, in Bengal, devastating cyclones) with the rise of the national intelligentsia in the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s made a deep, lasting impression. Agrarian localism and diversity dissolved into a national history of endemic village distress, calamity, and poverty that demanded urgent attention from progressive agents of development. After 1877, stereotypes of famine spread widely and quickly. To raise funds for his relief organisation in India, George Lambert rushed to America in 1898 to publish a book entitled *India, Horror-Stricken Empire (containing a full Account of the*

Famine, Plague, and Earthquake of 1896–7. Including a complete narration of Relief Work through the Home and Foreign Relief Commission). In 1913, a student, Alexander Loveday, wrote a prize-winning essay at Peterhouse, Cambridge, declaring sophomorically: ‘Poverty in England, or America, or Germany is a question of the distribution of wealth . . . [whereas in] India, it is a question of production.’ Loveday went on to explain India’s woes by citing the quality of soil, weather, technology, and agricultural practices; and, like Lambert, he opined that only massive state investment and relief, supported by enlightened, generous, public contributions, could reduce the suffering of the poor in British India.² By 1900, it was firmly planted in the mind of modernity that South Asian villagers live perpetually at the edge of death and starvation, on the brink of catastrophe.

In the 1840s, we can see the early beginnings of a modern development discourse (which would provide a strong narrative centre for agrarian historical studies) in petitions by critics of the East India Company against excessive, coercive taxation, and in petitions by Arthur Cotton for increased government irrigation expenditure. In 1869, Lord Mayo argued for the foundation of an imperial department of agriculture in terms that indicate the tone of public discussion:

For generations to come the progress of India . . . must be directly dependent on her progress in agriculture . . . There is perhaps no country in the world in which the State has so immediate and direct an interest in such questions . . . Throughout the greater part of India, every measure for the improvement of the land enhances the value of the property of the State. The duties which in England are performed by a good landlord fall in India, in a great measure, upon the government. Speaking generally, the only Indian landlord who can command the requisite knowledge is the state.³

Nationalists used Mayo’s argument against his government. They argued that Indian prosperity had become poverty under the British. Famine deaths had increased. Excess taxation had ruined agriculture. Land settlements had punished investors. Deindustrialisation had forced workers onto the land. State expenditure for improvement was

² Lambert’s book was published by the Mennonite Publishing Company, Elkhart, India. A. Lovejoy, B.A., *The History and Economics of Indian Famines* (Le Baz Prize Essay, 1913), first published, 1914; reprinted by Usha Publishing, Delhi, 1985, pp. 5–8.

³ Elizabeth Manak, ‘Formulation of Agricultural Policy in Imperial India, 1872–1920: A Case Study of Madras Presidency’, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Hawaii, 1979, p. 27.

paltry and the government's claim to be working in the interest of the people was at best hypocritical.

The national agrarian scene became a ground for debate, research, and political action; and in these formative decades, state institutions and urban intellectuals invented the modern sciences of development. Engineers had already captured the field of irrigation. Soil scientists, chemists, biologists, and botanists did research that would be organised under the Imperial Council for Agricultural Research and catalogued extensively in 1929 by the Royal Commission on Agriculture. State scientists made British India into a laboratory for breeding new crop varieties fifty years before the green revolution. Economists studied mountains of official statistics on food supplies, prices, commodity crops (indigo, opium, sugarcane, tea, coffee, jute, tobacco, groundnuts, wheat, and rice), farm incomes, investment, and productivity; and they also developed an original theory of Indian economics, which stimulated the first round of village studies in the 1920s. The science of Indian economics was described authoritatively by Radhakamal Mukerjee, in 1916, in a textbook that began with a model of a traditional village economy disrupted by heavy tax demands, private property laws, voracious money lending, and capitalist commercialism, all imposed by the British.⁴ Commercialisation loomed large for the early economists and, drawing on data going back to the 1840s, their studies often focused on problems of coercion. This focus was logical because their model of a traditional village economy did not include any indigenous commercial impulse or history, so that coercion would seem necessary to initiate agrarian commodity production and taxation. Forced sales, bonded labour, coerced revenue collections, and excess land alienation were seen as colonial pathologies, producing poverty and needing to be studied and remedied. Freedom from colonialism became widely identified with freedom from all the coercion and disruption of capitalism. Basic elements of the national model of village India were not unique to India, and Gandhian ideas of village self-sufficiency, solidarity, and harmony were also found in pre-modern Britain, for instance by Gilbert Slater, the first professor of Indian Economics at the University of Madras. Like his contemporaries, H. H. Mann and Radhakamal Mukerjee, Slater saw the village economy in Europe and Asia as traditionally stable and coherent; this

⁴ *The Foundation of Indian Economics*, Bombay, 1916.

provided what Mann would call the ‘social framework of agriculture’ – what Karl Polanyi would later describe as the ‘embeddedness’ of the economy in traditional society. Using this broadly accepted theory of indigenous, village India, many economists sought to bolster village tradition while making villagers richer at the same time, to make modernisation and development more authentically and effectively Indian. Gandhian and Nehruvian ideas about Indian modernity had the same scientific roots.

By 1930, historians had also nationalised agrarian India. But they took a different path. A century before the convocation of the Indian National Congress, Indologists and orientalist – Indians and Europeans – were composing texts that would inspire the national imagination. In the middle-class college curriculum, history informed nationality. R. C. Dutt was a towering figure. He responded to W. W. Hunter’s (1868) call for ‘rural history’ with his own study of Bengal peasant conditions (1874); he wrote a serious study of ancient India (1896); and then he wrote the first nationalist history of colonial agrarian policy (1908). With Dutt, history joined the national movement, and in the 1920s it became a national ground for debate and exhortation. History books discussed all types of national issues and formed a repository for competing accounts of national character.⁵ In this context, in 1929, William Moreland published the first academic monograph on agrarian history, *The Agrarian System of Moslem India*.⁶ Dutt and Naoroji had set the stage by recounting the greatness of classical India and the depredations of British rule, and Moreland confronted the nationalist critique of British land policies with a study of pre-British north India, going back to the fourteenth century, to argue that old elements from India’s past explained its agricultural backwardness, not British rule. He countered the national glorification of Indian tradition with an account of pre-colonial oppression, which put Muslim rulers specifically in a bad light. The ‘idea of agricultural

⁵ See David Ludden, ‘History (Pre-Colonial)’, in Joseph W. Elder, Ainslee T. Embree, and Edward C. Dimock, eds., *India’s Worlds and U.S. Scholars: 1947–1997*, Delhi, 1998, pp. 265–82.

⁶ Intellectual connections across the wider world of historical thinking are indicated by the fact that disruptions of modernity and ‘the long-term evolution of rural society from the Middle Ages to the present’ were also the foundational themes in rural history in England and France. The public presentation of Marc Bloch’s long-term study of French rural society began with a series of lectures in Oslo in 1929. See Richard Kerr, ‘The Nature of Rural History’, in Richard Kerr, ed., *Themes in Rural History of the Western World*, Ames, 1993, pp. 4–5.

development', he said, 'was already present in the fourteenth century, but the political and social environment was unusually unfavourable to its fruition'. Specifically, he said, from the Delhi sultanates (1206–1526) through the Mughal empire (1556–1707), 'two figures stand out as normally masters of the peasants' fate . . . the [revenue] farmer and the assignee' who together waged 'a barren struggle to divide, rather than . . . to increase, the annual produce of the country', a 'legacy of loss, which Moslem administrators left to their successors and which is still so far from final liquidation'.⁷

By 1930, agrarian history entered national policy debates and, ever since then, the writing of agrarian history has meshed with political disputation. Moreland pushed a line of argument against landlordism that was just gaining momentum when Jawaharlal Nehru became President of the All-India Congress Committee in 1930. He announced a radical turn in politics by writing this:

the great poverty and misery of the Indian People are due, *not only to foreign exploitation in India but also to the economic structure of society, which the alien rulers support so that their exploitation may continue.* In order therefore to remove this poverty and misery and to ameliorate the condition of the masses, it is essential to make revolutionary changes in the present economic and social structure of society and to remove the gross inequalities.⁸

Nehru married history and politics; he used history politically the way Gandhi used philosophy. When he wrote *The Discovery of India*, in 1944, he found many lessons for the nation and its leaders in Indian history, going back to ancient times, and by 1947 Nehru's official version of agrarian history was etched into the Congress party platform:

Though poverty is widespread in India, it is essentially a rural problem, caused chiefly by overpressure on land and a lack of other wealth-producing occupations. India, under British rule, has been progressively ruralised, many of her avenues of work and employment closed, a vast mass of the population thrown on the land, which has undergone continuous fragmentation, till a very large number of holdings have become uneconomic. It is essential, therefore, that the problem of the land should be dealt with in all its aspects. Agriculture has to be improved on scientific lines and industry has to be developed rapidly in its various forms . . . so as not only to produce wealth but also to absorb people from the land . . .

⁷ William Moreland, *The Agrarian System of Moslem India*, Cambridge, 1929; reprinted Delhi, 1968, pp. 205–6.

⁸ A. Moin Zaidi, ed., *A Tryst with Destiny: A Study of Economic Policy Resolutions of the Indian National Congress Passed During the last 100 years*, New Delhi, 1985, p. 54, italics added.

Planning must lead to maximum employment, indeed to the employment of every able-bodied person.⁹

During the half-century after 1947, agrarian South Asia changed dramatically. I discuss this in chapter 4, but, to explain my approach in this book, I need to note that, during the 1950s and 1960s, state institutions charged with national development dominated politics and thinking about agrarian history. In these decades, historians focused primarily on state policy. Ranajit Guha's *A Rule of Property for Bengal* and Irfan Habib's *The Agrarian System of Mughal India* both appeared in 1963, and they represent a historical perspective from which official statements of state ideology seem to determine state policy and to generate logical effects everywhere that policy reigns. The nationality of the countryside under British rule – its national unity as agrarian territory – seemed to be self-evident in these decades; and it was described beautifully in A. R. Desai's *The Social Background of Indian Nationalism* (1948), and many other books. But during the 1960s – the decade of Nehru's death, of the early green revolution, and of continuing struggles for land reform – arguments began to gain ground among historians to the effect that dominant state ideologies do not necessarily determine the content or conduct of state policy; and, in addition, that states do not dictate the course of history. How ideas about history changed so radically in the 1960s and 1970s remains to be studied. Certainly historians of South Asia expanded their appreciation of the diversity of the subcontinent and of the longevity of its disparate agrarian regions. The national unity of colonial experience came unravelling with empirical work that challenged the arguments put forth in the 1947 Congress platform. Historians began to emphasise the local diversity of social forces and political alliances in British India. Regional diversity became more politically prominent after the 1956 states' reorganisation, the rise of non-Congress state governments, and the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. An intellectual rupture also occurred in the paradigm of national development, which polarised agrarian studies. The theory and practice enshrined in the green revolution – based on state-sponsored science and technology – faced opposition from theorists and movements promoting revolutionary transformations based on worker and peasant mobilisation, a red revolution. During the last

⁹ A. Moin Zaidi, *A Tryst with Destiny*, p. 72.

decade of anti-imperialist war in Vietnam, historians discovered a long history of agrarian radicalism in South Asia, and more evidence appeared to substantiate diverse, contrary theories of agrarian history.

By 1980, agrarian history had moved away from the state toward society. Though modern history remained officially confined to the colonial period, agrarian history continued to reach back into the medieval period and to extend to the present day; and it continued to reach beyond the limits of South Asia in its concern with poverty, revolution, imperialism, and other Third World issues. By 1985, some writing in agrarian history was still concerned primarily with national history, but more and more work focused on local, subaltern, peasant, pastoral, and tribal experience. When Ranajit Guha's first volume of *Subaltern Studies* appeared in 1981 and his *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* arrived in 1983, it was clear that a major shift in historical thinking had occurred since 1963. In the 1980s and 1990s, the study of the state was further displaced by studies of social power. This trend was not confined to South Asia. The historical profession in general turned away from politics and economics toward society and culture. In these decades, national states also lost power in their own national territories as structural adjustment and economic liberalisation changed the role of the state in development. Nationalism became an object of academic and cultural criticism. State-centred development strategies came under attack; people-centred, grassroots development became prominent. Environmentalism, feminism, and indigenous people's movements challenged old development agendas. Again, South Asia was not alone. A modern world regime of economic development which began to emerge in the 1920s – centred on the complementary opposition of capitalism and socialism – crumbled in the 1980s (though some of its old players – the World Bank, the IMF, huge foundations, multinational corporations, and big capitalist countries – are still thriving today). In South Asia, new social movements arose as the Congress Party declined. Battles in Punjab, Jharkhand, Telangana, Bihar, Jaffna, Kashmir, Assam, the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and elsewhere turned attention toward regional and local issues. Many scholars who would have been looking for the roots of revolution during the 1970s turned instead in the 1990s to localised, often doggedly individualistic resistance among subaltern peoples. Historians began to look at both capitalist and socialist states with a new critical eye, 'from the bottom up', which

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gave the state a new kind of theoretical meaning. The state now came to be studied not so much from the inside – from the centre of state policy thinking – as from the margin, from points of critical perspective outside the state and its policy consciousness.

These intellectual trends have left scholars in a better position to explore social power in state territories and everyday life. We can now use history to illuminate contemporary conditions and bring history down to the present, rather than stopping history in 1947. This book considers a long history of social power in many agrarian environments rather than treating agrarian history as a feature of nationality, nationalism, or nationhood. It combines research in a number of different theoretical paradigms to form a comparative history of regions and localities. It does not attempt to represent authentic local voices in agrarian societies, subaltern or otherwise. Recent efforts to capture subaltern voices are salutary, but they pinpoint historical situations rather than describing agrarian change, and they have little to say about patterns of diversity. Everyday life obscures patterns of change across generations and across landscapes of disparate local circumstances. As we accumulate more accounts of local experience, we need to step back periodically to assess patterns and trends, and that is my intention here. Moreover, studies of existing consciousness do not confront the veracity of ideas about the agrarian past, and old ideas tend to survive in popular discourse long after scholars have shown them to be untrue. For instance, a fallacious assumption still remains that basic stability characterised the agrarian world before colonialism. This sturdy idea leads many authors, even today, to imagine the nineteenth century as it was theorised by Karl Marx, R. C. Dutt, and Radhakamal Mukerjee, as a time of radical disjuncture and discontinuity imposed on stable village society, culture, and economy by European conquest and colonial domination. Agrarian history has other stories to tell.

SEASONS

South Asia includes well over a billion people (a quarter of the world's population), and eight of ten live in places classified officially as 'rural', surrounded by agriculture. A much smaller proportion work on the land and non-agricultural employment is growing rapidly, but a substantial majority still depend on agriculture for their livelihood.

Agrarian history is not just a local matter, therefore, even though farming is always local in its everyday conduct: the agrarian past has conditioned states as well as most other social institutions. For historical study, we can define agriculture as the social organisation of physical powers to produce organic material for human use. Animal and forest products fall within this definition, so agriculture includes not only farming but also animal husbandry, pastoralism, fishing, and harvesting the forest (though not mining, manufacturing, trade, transportation, banking, ritual activity, writing history, and other related occupations). This broad definition is useful because many specialised types of production are tightly intertwined in agrarian environments and we need one term to embrace many specialists even as we consider their situations separately. To historicise agriculture, we need to map its complexity as a social phenomenon involving the daily exertion of energy and intelligence by many individuals. Agrarian space is at once political, social, and cultural. It is political because power and resistance constitute work on the land, effect control over assets, and distribute products. Farms are also sites of culture. As the words 'culture' and 'cultivation' indicate, farming is embedded within powers to 'civilise' land, and agriculture entails symbolic and dramatic activity that might seem to have little to do with farming – including religious rituals, urban spectacles, and even history writing. Agriculture is obviously economic in the original household sense, but also in the modern sense that farms represent individual rationality and sustain national wealth. Farming is full of input–output rationality and calculations that do not necessarily obey the economists. Farms are physically built into specific bits of land to create landscapes that farmers change over time, so farming falls into the realm of natural and physical science in addition to social science. No one academic discipline controls the study of agriculture.

We can bring together all the various dimensions of agriculture by focusing on landscapes of social power. Farming is the point of contact between the human powers that organise agriculture and the changing natural environment. No other occupation changes the land so much as farming. It is the major engine of ecological change in human history. State institutions enclose and influence social power in agricultural territory, and, though historians often appreciate the changes wrought by states on human living conditions, the powers of transformation in agriculture come primarily from the activity of

farming itself. Farms change the land and produce new possibilities for the future. Agriculture articulates broadly with nature and civilisation, but its specificity as a historical phenomenon comes from the character of farming as a social activity. Other kinds of social action occur on the land, so decisions about their conduct are often located consciously within a specific physical setting, but none more than farming. And none is more dedicated to its time and place in the seasons of the year. In many other types of social activity, the land provides symbolism, context. But every act in farming directly implicates the soil, so that nature is an active participant – in a particular place – from which farming cannot be detached, and local conditions shape the conduct and outcome of human activity in farming, in two senses: nature is perceived as an agent in farming by farmers themselves, within culture; and nature also works outside culture – behind its back – because seeds, rain, and soil, like human bodies, have logics to which people must simply adjust. Agrarian cultures accept and rationalise this behind-the-back quality of nature in their famous pragmatism, experimentalism, fatalism, and common sense.

Farming mingles social labour with nature, like the rain with the soil, and, in the process, physical and cognitive aspects of agriculture give the land cultural meaning, conditioning how people think about landscapes. *Agricultural* landscapes emerge over long periods of time from farming activity that conditions the natural world of human aesthetics. Agriculture creates thereby a cultural text for the human experience of nature. Farming defines nature, how it feels and looks in practice. Agriculture is civilisation at work on the land, humanising nature and naturalising the powers that human societies exert upon nature. Territorial concepts, powers, and social forms are built into landscapes to define the land as an agricultural aspect of nature. But agriculture also changes nature to create the physical characteristics of spaces in which people carry on social life, changing over time how people think about their world. Agriculture is humanity sculpting the earth, designing habitats, making a landscape as a kind of architecture, and producing symbolic domains that form the spatial attributes of civilisation.

Farms mark time at the point of contact between human powers and natural forces outside human control. Agrarian history unfolds in the seasons of everyday life in agricultural societies. Farming moves to

the rhythm of holiday seasons, wedding seasons, rainy seasons, and seasons of fruits, vegetables, and grains; seasons of war, famine, and state pageants; and seasons of opportunity and hunger, which embrace whole territories of civilisation. Seasonal time seems to be cyclical, because ideas about seasons are modelled on patterns of natural repetition. But seasonality is also historical, because its cultural construction moves back to the future, as people predict and gamble based on their remembered experience. The understanding of seasonal patterns comes from observation and past predictions, apprehensions of the future; it encodes memory and evidence from past events. The regularity of seasonal rhythms – which define the calendar of human activities in each farm setting – allows investment to occur in one season with the hope and probabilistic expectation that dividends will accrue in the next. Correct action today creates future dearth or prosperity, depending on what the future brings. Lost opportunities and bad times can hurt for years. Understanding today's condition always requires dredging up the past, to see what went right or wrong. Any loss or accumulation represents the yield of the past. The cyclical quality of seasons thus encourages thinking about the future and the past, together, and calculations of past yield for making future-oriented decisions. Family incomes, state revenues, and capitalist profit depend on the predictability and the unpredictability of price movements across the seasons.

Agrarian time has physical substance and human emotion. Its content arises in part from the influence of seasons on the timing and the outcome of decision-making and in part from cultural experience. We know when we have entered a new kind of territory when the season has a different character, when local wisdom treats the same time of year very differently. The synchronisation of social life with nature means that big decisions must take the season into account; and decisions can affect the future drastically. War, migration, industrialisation, state building, irrigation building, urbanisation, and rebellion represent decisions by many individuals in seasons of their own agrarian space; and decisions accumulate to alter the experience and reality of seasonality. The flood, the famine, the drought, the plague, and all the big events in agrarian life are always connected culturally and experientially to the nature of the harvest and to human entitlements to the fruit of the land. Every year, a harvest consists of perishable produce with a limited, predictable life span, which not

only feeds people in the present but also influences the future size, health, and activity of a population; and the harvest also determines prices for a period of time. Harvests affect prices very widely even in industrial economies and thus influence social experience and exchange relations throughout society; so that harvests influence the building and repair of cities and also the conduct of war, rituals, weddings, manufacturing, and commerce. Predictions and plans for future production on the farm are tied up tightly with seasonal planning for marriages and other events in the production of kinship and community. Plans for new planting and farm investments are tied up not only with predictions about rain but also with political gossip and economic prognostication. Daily decisions on the farm are inflected by big decisions in capital cities, where rulers need funds and support from the countryside. Historically, therefore, a great many elements influence the size, character, and feeling of agricultural space, in addition to the influence of states, empires, and nations.

Seasons connect farming time to natural time and divinity. Agriculture coordinates heaven and earth. Repetitive seasons – readable in the skies – display signs that forecast and stimulate the conduct and outcome of many kinds of social activity which intersect in farming. Agriculture’s seasonality provides a temporal pattern of predictability, calculation, expectation, and planning for agrarian society as a whole. Seasonal uncertainty likewise provides a temporal framework in which to calculate risk and provisioning: it provides a temporal logic for social exertions of control, cooperation, solidarity, and initiatives against catastrophe. Agriculture constitutes a history of experience that informs thinking about survival and prosperity, investment and success. Each season is a day in the life of all the many social institutions that intermingle with farming in agricultural territories.

The physical quality of seasons in South Asia forms a huge transition zone between the aridity of Southwest Asia and the humidity of Southeast Asia. As we travel east from the high, dry Sulaiman slopes, across the arid Peshawar valley, the Salt Range, the Punjab and the Indus valley, and then down the increasingly humid Gangetic plain to the double delta of the Ganga and Brahmaputra rivers, we move from arid lands dotted by fields of wheat and millet to a vast flatland of watery paddy and fish farms. Looking outward from South Asia to the west and east, we see its distinctive pattern of monsoons giving way in Afghanistan to a temperate zone pattern of

hot summers and cold winters, with less rain all year, and giving way in Myanmar to the humid tropics' cycle of long, heavy rainy seasons with high average temperature and humidity. Chittagong is ecologically on the borderland of Southeast Asia; Kabul lies at the border of Central Asia. The sun moves the months of humidity and aridity that define agricultural time in South Asia. Winter cold and summer heat are more pronounced in the north, where they influence the extent of wheat cultivation, but otherwise do not have major implications for the activity of farming, except at high altitudes. The same crops can be grown in all the plains and valleys of South Asia with suitable inputs of water. Temperature regimes differ somewhat but we find the same seasonal pattern in Kashmir, Assam, the Konkan Coast, and Sri Lanka – all rice-growing regions. North-south differences are less pronounced in South Asia than across comparable distances between Scotland and Italy, Beijing and Hong Kong, or New England and Florida. Everywhere (except at very high altitudes), the calendar and historic rhythms of farming in South Asia are pegged not to temperature but rather to moisture. In general terms that apply to the long expanse of agrarian history, the seasonal pattern can be described as a cyclical narrative, roughly as follows. The physical substance of the seasons organises a vast range of variation in South Asia and sets it apart from other agricultural environments in Eurasia.

In January, the sun heads north across the sky from its winter home south of the equator, as the air dries out and heats up. Days lengthen and winter rains dissipate. April and May are the hottest months when it almost never rains. In June, Himalayan snow-melt gorges the rivers in the north and the summer monsoon begins. The leading edge of the monsoon moves north-west from May through July, from Myanmar into Afghanistan. By late May, the monsoon has hit the Andaman Islands and Sri Lanka, and then it hits Kerala and Chittagong at about the same time. The earliest, heaviest, and longest monsoon season engulfs the far south (Sri Lanka and Kerala), the north-east (from Bihar to Assam and Chittagong), and the central-eastern regions of Orissa, Chhattisgarh, and Jharkhand. These are the most tropical regions with the most densely tangled natural forest cover and the most extensive jungles. At the summer solstice, when the sun begins to move south again, the summer monsoon will have touched all of South Asia. But it provides the least rain to the arid western plains and the north-west, which have the shortest, driest rainy season; and it

brings very little rain to the interior of the central peninsula, which lies in the rain shadow of the Western Ghats. These are dry regions of savannah, scrub, and desert. As the days begin to shorten, from July onward, the rains continue but scatter more and more, week by week, though it can still be raining periodically in October, when a second season of rain begins, called the winter monsoon, which pours unpredictably on the south-east and north-east and often brings cyclones off the Bay of Bengal to attack Andhra and Bangladesh.¹⁰ This fickle second monsoon lasts into January, when five months of dry days begin again.

The seasonal calendar is marked by festivals, astrological signs, and natural phenomena which articulate agriculture with a vast array of social activities. People enjoy the cool of December and January. As the sun moves north and the summer sets in, the sun becomes harsh, hot days accumulate, water bodies evaporate, the earth hardens, and farm work slackens. It is time for travel, migration, and moving herds to water and pasture in the hills; time for hunger, cholera and smallpox, skin and eye infections, malnutrition, dehydration, crying babies, and scavenging; time for trading and transporting, stealing, guarding, and fighting; time for rituals of honour and spectacle, and for building, repair, loans, and debt, sometimes desperate commitments that will influence social relations of agriculture for seasons to come. The dry months of the year are full of preparations for the next rainy season, sustained by the immediate yield of the harvest.

Crops move off the land at different times of the year, but most profusely during the second and third months after the start of each monsoon, and the biggest harvest period is September–December. For example, in the north-east, with its high rainfall running from June into January, there are three major harvest seasons. *Rabi* crops are mostly rice but include wheat, barley, and pulses in Bihar, and the rabi season covers March, April, and May. *Bhadoi* crops, which include millets in Bihar and Chota Nagpur in addition to rice, arrive in August–September. The *aghani* season – called *kharif* in north India – covers November, December, and part of January and brings the great harvest of the year. Winter rice, called *aman*, ‘was incomparably the

¹⁰ Damaging cyclones were recorded in Bengal in 1831, 1832, 1833, 1840, 1848, 1850, 1851, 1864, 1867, 1874, 1876, 1885, and 1942. The worst by far were in 1864, 1867, 1874, and 1942. See Arabinda Samanta, ‘Cyclone Hazards and Community Response’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 20 September 1997, p. 2425.

most important and often the sole crop grown in the districts of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa' at the end of the nineteenth century, covering almost half the total land under cultivation.¹¹ By contrast, in the dry hills of western India, for the Bhils in the Narmada River basin, at the western tip of the Vindhya mountains, the agricultural year begins abruptly in May, after long, hot months without rain or local work, and now 'people cannot sleep in the afternoon' because it would 'appear indolent, and nature bestows her bounty only on those who bring it their industry as tribute'. Anticipating rain, 'people who had migrated to the plains return home for the start of work' and harrowing and planting start with the rain in June. Harvesting maize and *bajra* millets begins in August, and harvesting *jowar* millets and groundnuts continues through October. In November and December, 'people sell chula, groundnuts, and other cash crops, carrying them to the traders'.¹² After every harvest, crops take new life in the realm of circulation. They assume new material forms as movable measures and as piled-up stores of grain, fruit, pulses, and vegetables, in stocks, carts, trucks, bags, head loads, and shops. Crops become food, cuisine, feasts, stocks, clothing, and adornments; they realise their symbolic potential as gifts, offerings, tribute, largess, shares, alms, commodities, and credit advances. In this realm, in the season of circulation, investments by the buyers of farm produce, made in anticipation of the harvest, when crops were in the ground, seek dividends – because prices drop at harvest time and then rise predictably as the heat prolongs, and, by June, predictions about the coming monsoon also begin to affect prices. Speculators seek returns accordingly. Agrarian wealth arises from the social powers that articulate these two great seasons – of cultivation and circulation – in the life of agricultural produce. The calendar differs for animal and vegetable products, for fish, fruit, and forest products, and for different grains in every region; but everywhere, it moves to the rhythm of the sun, the rain, and the harvest cycle. Commodity prices and markets – and thus profits and revenues for business and government – move along the temporal path of agricultural seasonality; and, today, farm seasons influence the

¹¹ Malabika Chakravarti, 'The Lethal Connection: Winter Rice, Poverty and Famine in Late Nineteenth Century Bengal', *Calcutta Historical Journal*, 18, 1, 1996, 66–95.

¹² Amita Baviskar, 'Displacement and the Bhilala Tribals of the Narmada Valley', in Jean Dreze, Meera Samson, and Satyajit Singh, eds., *The Dam and the Nation: Displacement and Resettlement in the Narmada Valley*, Delhi, 1997, pp. 119–120.

timing and outcome of elections and set the stage for most major political decisions in South Asia.

In the hottest months, in the season of circulation, as crops move off the land, people also move out in search of work. Families that do not grow enough food on their own land to support their diets for the whole year have always constituted a large proportion of the farm population; and, when farming is done and the heat is intense, many go out in search of sustenance. Their numbers and trajectories vary with the season. In years of plenty, they can find food close to home, and during droughts they go farther afield. But, with predictable regularity, food becomes more costly as labour is let loose from the farm in the hot season. For those who must work for others, this is a time of distress. For those who have powers to employ, it is a time to acquire workers for seasonal off-farm labour; and people with stores of food and money do just that. Today, landowners with year-round supplies of irrigation water from mechanical pumps, wells, and canals in Punjab bring workers all the way from Bihar, and, as we will see, such inequalities in the distribution of capital and labour have had a major influence on patterns of social power and economic development over the centuries.¹³ Historically, seasonal workers have moved in large numbers into warfare, manufacturing, building, and hauling, all perennial options. They transport and process crops in the season of circulation. The expansion and contraction of opportunities for such non-farm work in the hot season is a major determinant of workers' annual income. Dirt roads trampled hard and riverbeds dried up in the hot sun make this a good time to transport workers, grain, animals, and building materials. Haulers, herders, carters, and grazing land are badly needed during the season of circulation. Water and fodder for animals are a problem. Transhumant animal keepers take their flocks to the hills for grazing, and herds moving up and down the slopes for grazing are major elements in mountain ecology, where farming and grazing often compete for land, as they do today in the Siwalik hills and higher ranges above Punjab.¹⁴

Supply, demand, people, goods, and news on the move travel through towns and cities, where social needs, social accumulation, and

¹³ Manjit Singh, 'Bonded Migrant Labour in Punjab Agriculture', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 15 March 1997, 518–19.

¹⁴ Richard P. Tucker, 'The Evolution of Transhumant Grazing in the Punjab Himalaya', *Mountain Research and Development*, 6, 1, 1986, 17–28.